

Statement by Congressman Tom Udall (NM-03)
Subcommittee on Forests and Forest Health
Oversight Hearing on the USFS and Bureau of Land Management 2006 Budget Requests

March 9, 2005

Mr. Chairman,

I join you in welcoming our distinguished witnesses and thank Undersecretary Rey and Director Clarke for their testimony.

Many Americans may not be aware of the vast responsibilities that Director Clark and the Bureau of Land Management undertake. As the manager of more than 260 million acres of land spread mostly over 12 Western states, the operations and management of the BLM directly affect the lives and livelihoods of millions of American families. As a result, even modest changes in funding priorities for this agency must be examined very carefully.

While the current budget request includes modest increases for many BLM programs, we are generally concerned that these increases are sorely inadequate, failing to keep pace even with inflation, causing these programs to lose ground in real-dollar terms. More important, the spending on these programs is an increase over last year's levels only because these same programs suffered deep cuts in *prior* fiscal years. If this budget request were enacted into law, many BLM accounts would have to make due at levels below where they were two years ago.

Of particular concern are the Administration's decisions to request no funding for the Range Improvement Program or the State and Local Fire Assistance Program. Both initiatives have provided critical, on-the-ground funding for important segments of the BLM core mission and the decision to abandon these functions is troubling.

We look forward to exploring these specific concerns, as well as the larger needs of the BLM, with Director Clarke.

I also look forward to hearing from Undersecretary Rey about the Forest Service Budget. This year's proposed Forest Service budget marks about a 4 percent decrease in funding for the agency. Unfortunately, the programs that are hardest hit in this budget crunch are those that assist State and Local governments with job opportunities, economic development, and protection from wildfire.

For example, the Economic Action Programs were not funded for the second year in a row. Economic Action Programs help rural communities and businesses dependent on natural resources become sustainable and self-sufficient. I look forward to hearing from Undersecretary Rey why these programs were not funded.

Another concern is in the area of State and Private Forestry. State and Private Forestry was cut roughly 26 percent in this year's budget request. This includes a significant cut in cooperative fire assistance and forest health management. This funding request begs the question, how will State, local and tribal communities protect themselves from fire on the estimated 85 percent of lands of the wildland-urban interface that they control?

Again looking at wildland fire management, I applaud the Forest Service for the increase in this year's proposed budget for hazardous fuels reduction. *However*, it is disconcerting that while 492 million dollars between Forest Service and Department of Interior for hazardous fuels reduction is an increase from previous years, it is still significantly below the 760 million dollars for hazardous fuels reduction that was authorized by the Healthy Forest Restoration Act.

Lastly, I am puzzled by the large cut in Capital Improvement and Maintenance in the Forest Service budget request. Capital Improvement and Maintenance were cut by roughly one-third, adding to the estimated road maintenance backlog of eight billion dollars.

Again, Mr. Chairman, I look forward to today's hearing and the testimony and discussion with Undersecretary Rey and Director Clarke.